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SUBJECT: BAND-I-AMIR LAKES, AFGHANISTAN'S FIRST NATURAL PROTECTED AREA

REF: KABUL 2069

SUMMARY

¶1. The GoA and the international community are laying the groundwork to establish Afghanistan's first natural protected area at central Afghanistan's Band-i-Amir lakes in Bamyan Province. A recent visit there showed that the current circumstances at the lakes--one of the world's few large travertine lake complexes--appear to support the case for protecting the area. Embassy personnel met with local community leaders to hear their thoughts on the prospective protected status and how protection might affect the livelihoods of the people in the area. Given the uniqueness of the lake complex, the area may merit eventual designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site--a designation that depends on Afghanistan's ability to protect the area. End summary.

AFGHANISTAN'S FIRST NATIONAL PARK

¶2. Through the Embassy Science Fellows program, Embassy has been working with Afghanistan's National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) on a number of projects, including the protection of areas of extraordinary environmental value (reftel). The main protection effort is focused on the travertine lakes of Band-i-Amir. The Band-i-Amir lakes are situated in central Afghanistan, about 75 km west of Bamyan, and they comprise one of the world's most uniquely beautiful landscapes. The system comprises a chain of six lakes situated within a valley surrounded by steep 300-m cliff walls. The distinguishing feature of these lakes is their naturally formed travertine dams, which occur when gaseous carbon dioxide from calcium-rich spring water is fixed by bacterial or algal activity. The calcium gradually builds up in particular spots and ultimately dams the running water. There are very few locations in the world where this phenomenon occurs, and Band-i-Amir is a striking example. The travertine dams at Band-i-Amir approach 10 m. in height and several hundred meters in length. The lakes attract local and foreign tourists and could be an important destination for

eco-tourism, if provided the proper management and community support.

¶13. The lakes at Band-i-Amir appear to be in good hydrological condition and, despite a recent long series of drought years in Afghanistan, water levels appeared to be normal to high. Water clarity appeared excellent. Despite obvious human activity on the travertine dams, they appear to be structurally sound. However, increased tourist activity could jeopardize the natural structures; the most heavily visited dam features motorcycle, horse, and donkey rentals below the dams, as well as brightly colored fiberglass swan boats and a power boat (the "Donald Duck") in the lake itself. It is clear that the area will need active management to protect water quality and the integrity of the natural dams.

¶14. There are a few small villages scattered within the watershed of Band-i-Amir. These communities earn their livelihoods from livestock grazing and subsistence farming of wheat and potatoes, using gravity-fed irrigation. Although we had previously been informed that the area was overgrazed, only the areas in the immediate vicinity of the communities appeared to be experiencing noticeable plant and soil degradation from grazing pressures. The grazing pressures in the watershed appear to be localized, so it will be important for the health and integrity of the Band-i-Amir watershed that the grazing be appropriately managed. All of the villages we saw were located at least 400 m. from the shores of the lake.

¶15. Evidence of the presence of native megafauna was scant, but local community leaders indicated that such wildlife is present within the watershed, and that it has been under pressure from hunting. This is further reason for protecting the area.

¶16. It is clear that the GoA and its partners have much to do in the

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way of building local awareness of what park status will mean, and they will have to set realistic expectations. A leader of the local shura (informal council) expressed concern about efforts to move a small bazaar a couple of hundred yards further away from the travertine dam--a concern that may be conditioned by his ownership of the bazaar building. Locals also indicated that they thought a large luxury hotel or two, full of rich Western tourists, would arrive shortly after the park is created. (NOTE: Band-i-Amir is a hard, dusty three-hour drive on dirt tracks from Bamyan, 75 km away. Bamyan itself is a 10-hour drive over bad roads from Kabul, the nearest significant population center with an international airport.

While Bamyan residents make the trek to Band-i-Amir for weekend recreation, the broader tourism potential depends on better roads and better security in Kabul, the air portal for foreign tourists. END NOTE.) There appeared to be little awareness of the possible impact of protection on grazing and other agricultural activities on the more remote parts of the lakes' watershed.

ASSISTANCE AND SUPPORT

¶17. Embassy has been working with NEPA, the United Nations Environmental Program, the Asian Development Bank, the USAID-funded Wildlife Conservation Society and others to put the framework in place to protect areas of significant environmental and natural heritage value in Afghanistan. A Band-i-Amir Coordinating Committee composed of representatives from the donor community, NGOs, and GoA agencies is currently working on an interim park management plan while waiting for the Parliament to approve draft legislation declaring Band-i-Amir a protected area. In addition to the effort to protect Band-i-Amir, NEPA and the international community are working to identify wetland resources for conservation and protection under the Ramsar Convention. Part of this effort, in which the Embassy Science Fellow has been involved, is the development of a draft law on protected areas. Indeed, passage of this law and implementing regulations is necessary both to protect Band-i-Amir and to lay the groundwork for designating the area as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Embassy has also advised the GoA on involving local communities and including economic development as an

integral part of the protection plans. For Band-i-Amir, essentially the test case for the GoA's protected areas efforts, there will be more opportunities for USG assistance once the GoA has passed the appropriate legislation and adopted implementing regulations. At that time, the USG could help with training the management and staff that will administer the protected area.

COMMENT: WORTH THE EFFORT TO PROTECT

¶8. The visit to Band-i-Amir, a rare foray into Afghanistan's natural areas, confirmed that the country has natural assets worth protecting. At least some of those assets, like Band-i-Amir, benefit from sparse population, inaccessibility, and apparent absence of exploitable natural resources. Other assets, such as the cedar forests of Nuristan or the ibex herds of the Hazarajat, are not so lucky, and they have been depleted with astonishing rapidity over the past 25 years. From a purely economic point of view, these assets are worth preserving, if only because they have some potential for generating tourism revenue. Embassy would argue that it is also worth preserving whatever fraction of Afghanistan's natural heritage that still remains. Based on our conversations with ordinary people here, it appears that the notion of natural patrimony is very much a part of Afghan culture, and that the GoA would do well to show itself doing something to preserve that.

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